

# "The Word of a Tanner," by Orlene Gates

One Christmas eve in Virginia during the war between the North and the South, Rosy Tanner sat on the fence by the big gate and watched the blue soldiers go by their plantations, "millions and millions," she thought, some on foot and some on horses.

Rosy was not quite clear about this war. She knew that her father and her uncle Robert did not live at home any more, and that blue was the wrong color and gray was the right one. Besides this she had heard everybody saying how dreadful it would be when the blue soldiers came, and here they were, the last, and nothing had happened—so it was all right.

Just now she was mighty glad it was Christmas again. This year she wanted a real doll with china head and hands and feet, and a nice stiff sword body. Where such a plaything was to be got nobody in the family could think, but down down in her heart Rosy was sure her wish was coming true. Meantime it was pleasant for her and Mary, her little black maid, to sit on the fence and watch the army go past, and they did not budge off their perch until the last blue column disappeared behind the bend in the road, when they rushed to the house to find Mrs. Tanner.

"Mother," Rosy talked very fast to get in the first word—"the blue soldiers are here. I saw them! About millions, I think! And, mother, would you believe it, they are just the image of men! Mary said they had horns and hoofs and long white tusks!"

"That's what Uncle Jonah said," Mary laid the blame on the first person she could think of.

"Then Uncle Jonah was mistaken! Now, Mary, you and Miss Rosy must keep close in our grounds! It is not safe for little girls away from home these days! Do you hear?"

"Yes,um, Miss Molly!"

The two little girls meant to be good and kind, but somehow, before they knew it they found themselves playing in the willow grove by the creek. When Mary saw where they were she was frightened, for near by was the "haunted swamp," and the daylight was growing dimmer and dinner every minute.

"Let's go home, Miss Rosy! These hyar

woods is gittin' plum night, and dey ain't so safe, now!"

Mary went as fast as ever the slippery mud would let them, for they heard a crackling noise in the bushes to their left, as if some wild animal was following them. Although they hurried with all their might, they could not keep up with their heartbeats, and at last Rosy gave out and stopped. When she got her breath she whispered:

"Yes,um, Miss Molly! I des terrible shudderin'—dat what I se!"

They kept on for the minutes before Rosy dared speak again.

"You must stop it, Mary! Don't you know it's a noble honor to die a brave death for your country?" Rosy heard her Uncle Robert say this the night he rode off, and left everybody crying to break their hearts.

"Yes,um, I know hit of your soss, Miss Rosy! Mary sniffled, with her ear cocked toward the threatening noise. "But I some wante die on de count of nobility, an' I reckon dat hant gwine come after us tere—'ole Lavey! Lawdy!"

Mary screamed as a big hairy man crashed through the woods and stood over them in silence. They expected him to eat them up on the instant.

"Mary, go and bring me something to eat at the spring-house! Miss Rosy and I will meet you there! Don't tell any one what you want!"

"Yes,um, I ain't gwine tell," Mary stammered, "but how I gwine get no white fokes vittles? I talls Uncle Jonah—he got de key ter de pantry closet."

"Never mind about the pantry closet—get me something from your mammy's cabin."

"Yes,um, I gwine bring you what I kin; will dat do you, Miss Rosy?"

"Very well, indeed! Now, hurry, and you can find Miss Rosy and me at the spring-house!"

The man did not speak another word until they were inside the stone dairy-room with the door locked.

"I've got a secret, Rosy, that no one must know but you! Can you keep a secret? Rosy was still badly frightened, but she knew by this that the man was honest. She thought over his question before answering. Although she was only 9 years old, she had been taught that three truths, to hold fast a promise, and to keep a secret, so she could not afford to be hasty with the stranger, and some minutes passed before she made up her mind.

"I can try—I can try my best!"

"That is enough! I trust the word of a tanner!"

Without more ado he pulled a scrap of paper from the lining of his tattered hat

and made her stuff in it the leg of her little home-made congress gaiter. Then taking from his ragged shirt bosom a brown paper parcel, he held it a moment as if afraid to part with it.

"Give that note to your shoe to your mother, Rosy! And this parcel is for your stocking tomorrow—Santa Claus sent it all the way from Richmond! Whatever you do, don't break it or lose it! I've been through fire to get it here. And last of all, tell your blessed grandmother Tanner—that you saw—that I am—Why, Rosy, don't you know?"

"Uncle Robert!" She threw her arms around the neck of her youngest and favorite uncle.

"I can't stay, Rosy! He held her close for a minute. May Mary leave the rations here on the bench—I can get them after! Good-bye, my little girl—keep your promise, and be brave, no matter what happens!"

"I will, Uncle Robert! I will if they cut my head off!"

"When Mary got back and found the stranger gone, she was bitterly disappointed.

"What de Mars gentleman go at, Miss Rosy?" he fished him plenty to eat! and she let down her dress-suit to show that she had foraged, half a sweet potato, some, some ash cakes, a piece of hotted bacon, and a plug of chewing tobacco.

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she just thinks she's got to do everything I do!"

"I don't do no such thing, Miss Rosy!" Mary was deeply hurt. "Tain't proper for young white fokes ladies ter go gaddin' 'round de kentry by deefers!"

"Miss Mary! you are right, but Rosy will have to go this time alone!"

In troubled silence Mary watched the old lady button on Rosy's sack once more and see her red foot.

"Rosy, take your dolly with you and cut across the big field until you come to the path through Miller's pasture."

"Lawdy, ole miss! Mary broke in fearfully of consequences, "dar's whar dem Yankees is at!"

"I know it, Mary, but it is the shortest cut to the place she is to find! When you get by the stone camp, Rosy, turn to the left and walk straight ahead until you reach a clump of pine trees. If any one should be there and speak to you, you must answer, 'Merry Christmas, friend, for Christ's sake!' Can you do that?"

"Grandmother kissed her.

"I thought you could, dear! The Tanner and Marshall blood is a good mixture for courage. Now, darling, if you are careful and look out for Union pickets, I think you will come home all safe and sound! Then Grandmother Marshall laid both hands on Rosy's head.

"God bless my little grandchild, and make her brave for her country's sake!"

For a while after she started everything went well. But, trudging through Miller's pasture she got so entertained with her own thoughts that she forgot all about the Union pickets until all of a sudden a blue soldier came running forward with his bayonet pointing straight at her.

"Halt! What is the counter-sent?"

Rosy stopped short. She had never before heard a counter-sent, but she was not going to let this soldier know it. So she just drew herself up stiffly, as she had seen Grandmother Tanner do when she was very displeased.

"I'm taking a walk, sir!"

Rosy looked at the soldier straight into the lion's jaws—bent you afraid?"

Rosy loved the truth, but she was never going to tell any blue soldier how scared she was. So she made up a little

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enough to tell and not to know it! It would count to catch this Robert Tanner. The Colonel nodded, and the pleasant General turned to the little girl.

"Now tell me—what of all your uncles do you love the best?"

Rosy had been taught it was not becoming to show family preference in public.

"I love them all just the same!"

"Dear me! but they are lucky uncles! How many are there—Uncle Tom, and Uncle Dick and Uncle Robert—aren't there an Uncle Robert?"

Rosy did not answer.

"May be. You call him Uncle Bob, do you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Isn't he a splendid soldier?"

"I think every gentleman in our family is a good soldier, Mister General!"

"Certainly!" The General whisked out a pocket handkerchief, and mopped his face. "Colonel," added to that officer, "I give it up! I don't insist a lady—it is common to step on an officer! But I'll bet my head there is something to this! Ah, he turned once more to Rosy, 'will you believe it, I had pretty near forgot to tell you that Santa Claus did not forget—was at your home last night!'"

"The other man laughed as the youngest of the group stepped forward at the General's order, and kneeling down beside Rosy, took Roberta Lee in his hands.

"What a pretty doll! I always liked black hair and blue eyes and rosy cheeks, don't you?"

"You liked the boy officer so well, for that, that she let him hold Roberta Lee a little longer."

"Which Santa Claus brought her to you?"

"We haven't any but one in Virginia, and he lives up the chimney!"

"But, didn't Santa Claus send a letter on a bit of paper with the dolly?"

Rosy turned scarlet and kept her eyes on the ground.

"You struck near the truth that time, Lieutenant!" muttered the General.

"How far a walk were you taking?" asked the younger officer, as he returned Roberta Lee.

"Oh, as far as tea-time! And I think it must be tea-time now, and my mother expects me! It will be rude to keep her waiting, so if you will excuse me, Mister General, I should like to go home."

To the best of her ability Rosy was trying to behave as she thought her mother would like to have her.

"Rose Tanner," ordered the Colonel, before the General could speak, "stand up!"

Rosy stood up as if she were shot. "Now, tell us, if you please, where you were going when the sentinel caught you?"

"Do you know what happens to naughty little girls who refuse to answer?"

Her eyes opened wide, but not a sound crossed her lips.

"The Colonel sternly said, 'If you will not answer me, I shall be forced to confiscate the dolly!'"

In a flash she saw that beautiful sword-body sprinkling the earth. But she could not beg for mercy, for she had pledged her word never to tell where she was going. And if Roberta Lee had to die for it, she would die.

"Colonel," her clear little voice did not tremble, now she was pleading for her beloved treasure, "in course, had girls must be punished, but Roberta Lee ain't a bad girl—let me tell you just what I did and kept her safe all the days of her life, and punished me my own punishment—wouldn't that be more right?"

"For a moment no one spoke."

"Would you rather give up Roberta Lee than your secret?" asked the young Lieutenant, softly.

Rosy's lip quivered, and she swallowed hard. Then something in the officer's eyes comforted her among all these bearded men, and looking steadfastly in his face, she said bravely:

"I'd rather give up Roberta Lee than make my mother ashamed of me!"

"Colonel, this is the worst defeat of your career, and heaven keep you from another such!" The General's eyes shone with something bright as the shining officer with a low bow handed Roberta Lee back to Rosy.

"Now, Miss Rose Tanner, you are free to go home to tea. Tell your grandmother she ought to have named you Portia, for you have won your case and not a drop of blood shed!"

When Rosy was led back to the big road, there was still light enough to try once more to reach the clump of pine trees, so she went the long way, through the Stuart meadow and got to the place safely. After waiting in the cold until she was ready to cry, she was just going away when a gray horseman broke through the thicket and rode toward her.

"Hello, little girl—what brings you here?"

"Merry Christmas, friend, for Christ's sake!"

"Ah, you are Rose Tanner, and you've brought the dolly—may I have it?"

Rosy held up Roberta Lee with a smile. The man stooped for the doll and taking one of the pistols from his saddle holsters quickly cracked open the innocent china head with the butt and carefully extracted the paper stuffed in it.

"Oh, my dolly—my dolly—my beautiful Roberta Lee!"

In a moment the horseman was on his knees beside her. This last pang was too much and her courage gave way.

"Rose, my dear little girl, what have I done? Forgive me—I thought they told you, Roberta Lee was hid in the dolly. It was too cruel to let me break her without preparing you!"

Rosy sobbed and sobbed and the man did not know how to comfort her.

"Think, Rose, what a brave dolly she was—why, Roberta Lee died for her country! Any of us would do that, wouldn't we?"

Rosy tried to hush her sobs.

"I want my grandmother—and I'm afraid!"

"I thought so," said the man. "I tell you what—just you tuck dolly under your jacket, so, and you jump up in front of my saddle and we'll dash over to Grandmother Marshall in a trice. And by-and-by, you shall have a new head for the dolly—any word for it?"

It was not many minutes before the galloping horseman set her inside her grandmother's gate, when he said with a dry laugh:

"Present Gen. Moskey's regards to Madame Marshall, Rose—and tell her that the papers are all right!"

He had gone as if the earth had swallowed him.

Two weeks later was fought one of the bloodiest battles of the four years' war, and Roberta Lee's dispatches were at the bottom of it.

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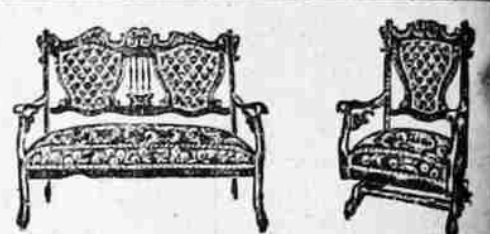
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